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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: AFENIFERE LEADER SAYS "NO" TO A NORTHERN
PRESIDENT

REF: ABUJA 2990

CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR HOWARD F. JETER. REASONS 1.5
(B) AND (D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: During an October 23 Lagos meeting with Ambassador Jeter, Afenifere leader Senator Abraham Adesanya labeled the impeachment threat against Obasanjo a ruse to return national political power to the North. Although not an Obasanjo supporter, Adesanya was adamant that the Presidency remain in Southern hands after the 2003 elections. Adesanya felt a national conference was needed to establish a national consensus before unbridled political competition degenerated into something more regrettable -- disunion. The Afenifere head believed a key to alleviating the mounting tension surrounding the 203 election was the swift enactment of a constitutional amendment limiting the President and Governors to one five-year term in office. End Summary

OBASANJO TRICKED THE NORTH; NOW THEY WANT HIS JOB

12. (C) On October 23, Ambassador Jeter met Senator Adesanya, head of "Afenifere," the preeminent Yoruba socio-cultural organization, at Adesanya's Lagos residence. Adesanya was joined by former Babangida era Foreign Minister A. Bola Akinyemi (1985-87), now a close Adesanya aide. Ambassador Jeter was accompanied by his Staff Assistant and PolCouns.

13. (C) Adesanya, a rather spry and energetic octogenarian, began the substantive discussion by claiming that Obasanjo was wandering in a political no man's land because he had broken rank with the Northern establishment who "selected" him into office in 1999. The North misread Obasanjo, thinking he was the same malleable Head of State who allowed his deputy Shehu Yar'Adua, a Northerner, to call many of the shots from 1976-79. In his second coming, Obasanjo was bent on being his own man, to the chagrin of Northern king makers who thought their electoral support had tied enough strings to Obasanjo to control him, Adesanya postulated.

TIME FOR A NATIONAL CONFERENCE IS NOW!

14. (C) While visibly delighted that Obasanjo's bullheadedness had foiled these perceived Northern machinations, Adesanya nonetheless criticized Obasanjo's stubbornness in not embracing the idea of a national conference. Obasanjo was out of step with dominant thought in his own Southwestern region, Adesanya complained. The President's lack of commanding support in Yorubaland was traceable, to a large extent, to his ambivalence regarding a national conference. Obasanjo was apprehensive the conference, once convened, might veer from the stated purpose of Nigerian unity to become the prelude to Nigeria's dismemberment.

15. (C) Yet, most Yorubas supported the idea and still wanted Nigeria to remain united; however, Adesanya explained that his people were absolutely tired of investing more in Nigeria than what they derived from it while other areas (i.e. the North) gave little and got much. A national conference was needed to

establish the heretofore-elusive national consensus. The conference also was required to determine "who we are and what we will do" as Nigerians, he expounded. Without such a harmonizing conference, a terrible day of reckoning awaited the country, Adesanya forecasted.

16. (C) Adesanya dismissed the present constitution and its 1979 antecedent as not fitting the bill. Both instruments were, in part, the work of conferences of eminent persons. However, these conferences were convened and controlled by then reigning military governments. Moreover, military Heads of State, including Obasanjo in 1979, could and did unilaterally change the documents presented to him by the deliberative assembly. Because these constitutions were, from their inception, subject to the caprice of a single individual, the documents never gained the sanctity and the respect usually reposed in the parchment containing a nation's organic law.

PATRIOTS TO THE RESCUE

17. (C) Adesanya, also a key member of the "Patriots" by virtue of his leadership of Afenifere, said he endorsed the Patriots' public statement asking Obasanjo to forego a second term. While asking Obasanjo not to seek reelection, he stressed the Patriots had opposed the impeachment threat against Obasanjo. "Why did the House wait so long to object to Obasanjo's alleged wrongdoings?" queried Adesanya. Due to their prolonged silence on some matters and active complacency on others, the House "was estopped" from fustigating the President to the point of seeking his removal. If Obasanjo must go, the lawmakers should go as well, declared Adesanya. At this late stage in the electoral calendar, the Patriots believed that impeachment was remarkably ill timed. Adesanya denigrated impeachment advocates as political "troublemakers" bent on shifting power from the Southwest back to the North, since VP Atiku would have assumed the Presidency upon Obasanjo's removal.

18. (C) The Northern politicians mistakenly thought they could threaten Obasanjo with impeachment because they supported his 1999 election more than his own Yoruba clan. However, on becoming President, Obasanjo also came to represent the South's ability to govern the nation. Thus, impeachment was not just about Obasanjo and his alleged wrongs. Northern moves to impeach him were tantamount to a coup in the eyes of the South and thus had kindled regional antagonism, Adesanya declared.

A SOUTHERN PRESIDENT, JUST NOT OBASANJO

19. (C) The Patriots believed power should remain in Southern hands after the coming election. Adesanya explained the group was established several years ago by Southwestern and Southeastern politicians frustrated that the North had controlled national politics by playing the two Southern zones against each other. In the Patriots, the Southwest was represented mainly by members of Afenifere and the Southeast by Ohaneze Ndigbo. Later, the Union of Delta States brought the South-South into the fold. Membership was also extended to some key opinion makers from the Middle Belt as well.

FIVE TIMES ONE IS BETTER THAN FOUR TIMES TWO

110. (C) The Patriots backed the proposed constitutional amendment of one five-year term for the President and State Governors, believing the change would reduce political tension. Adesanya claimed that politics was becoming too rabid because many office-holders sought to secure second terms even in the face of adamant, powerful opposition against their return. The only way to avoid spiraling tension was to constitutionalize the one-term requirement. The former Senator commented that the requirement had the salutary benefit of postponing elections for a year -- hopefully giving the woefully unprepared Independent National Electoral Commission time to plan for elections in 2004 instead of early 2003.

11. (C) Adesanya further explained that, if Obasanjo were given an extra year but not allowed to contest again, he would have an incentive to ensure that INEC was effective and impartial. Obasanjo's political legacy would not be based on his re-election but on the quality of his oversight of the first successful civilian-to-civilian election and transfer of power in Nigeria's history. Adesanya felt the amendment could be passed quickly, provided the State Legislatures acted fast. However, he acknowledged that most State Governors would oppose the measure and that, unlike the President's relationship with the National Assembly, the state executives exercised great influence over their respective Houses of Assembly.

NORTHERN CANDIDATES PROSPECTS IN THE SOUTH

12. (C) Responding to questions from Ambassador Jeter, Adesanya predicted that VP Atiku would have trouble gaining support in the Southwest if he wrestled the PDP nomination from Obasanjo. While Obasanjo was not highly popular, he was Yoruba and "this transcended personality." Atiku's candidacy would be negatively viewed as a premature "power shift" because Northerners believed the Presidency was their birthright and could not countenance seeing an independent Southerner at the helm. Adesanya predicted strong opposition would also confront Atiku in the South-South and the Southeast.

13. (C) The Afenifere leader discounted that Atiku could make inroads by selecting a Yoruba, such as longtime Atiku friend Lagos State Governor Tinubu, as his Vice Presidential running mate. Suggesting Tinubu was already in Afenifere's doghouse, Adesanya quipped Tinubu was having too much trouble running Lagos to aspire to the headache of governing the rest of Nigeria. Adesanya doubted if Tinubu would have the effrontery to team with Atiku. Chuckling "we will cross that bridge when we get to it," Adesanya left the clear impression that he would relish the chance to teach the Lagos Governor a few old-fashioned lessons about internal Yoruba politics.

14. (C) Regarding former Head of State Babangida, Adesanya said he would also find difficulty in the Southwest. Adesanya expostulated that former Head of State Mohammedu Buhari's candidacy was wholly bad and incapable of generating support due to Buhari's perceived Northern Moslem chauvinism. (Comment: Former Babangida Foreign Minister Akinyemi told the Ambassador in an aside before the meeting with Adesanya that Babangida would win 40 percent of the vote in the Southwest. While the old guard might oppose Babangida, Akinyemi thought Babangida would be supported by numbers of the younger-generation politicians and the professional class. The extensive network Babangida had developed and the favors doled out over the years would help immensely in the Southwest, Akinyemi thought. End Comment.)

15. (C) Adesanya contended that any Southern politician perceived as a front man for Northern interests would have a difficult time gaining support in the Southwest. Reports that Alex Ekwueme was being courted as a potential candidate by the Northern establishment would hurt the esteemed Igbo in the Southwest, Adesanya gauged. The South, particularly the Southwest, will no longer be duped by Northern political maneuvering, Adesanya concluded.

Comment

16. (C) Senator Adesanya had the look and energy level of a man a score or more younger than his eighty years. (Adesanya recently celebrated his 80th birthday.) Regarding President Obasanjo, Adesanya gave a Yoruba perspective markedly different from that of the Ooni of Ife's unabashed support for the President (reftel). While both men claim to represent the true Yoruba perspective, the Ooni saw Obasanjo as indispensable to Nigeria's stability; Adesanya said Obasanjo could go but the Presidency must remain below

Nigeria's Mason-Dixon line, at least, for the next presidential term.

17. (C) The point on which both the Ooni and Adesanya agree is that Northern politicians are attempting to recapture power in 2003. Both men are allied in asserting that the Yoruba Southwest will react vehemently to this prospective retaking of political power by the North. End Comment.
ANDREWS